LOVE AND DO AS YOU PLEASE
Galatians 5:13-26
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What a troublesome word freedom is. Webster's first definition is simply "the absence of necessity, coercion, restraint". I suppose that is how most of us define it - "the absence of necessity" - even though, in absolute terms, that definition is without content. It refers to a state which may exist when certain other phenomena do not exist, namely restrictions, rules, regulations. Freedom, it would seem, is pure potentiality: a pregnant condition waiting to see what will be born of it. The best, most relevant question about freedom is always, "What happens next?" And if all it means is the absence of necessity, I would submit that freedom is not always what it is cracked up to be.

For several weeks in June it is absolute bliss for a youngster not to have to get up at dawn to go to school. But then the days drag because there isn't always enough to do and the pure potentiality of freedom begins to weigh very heavily. And even though it would be rank heresy to say it out loud, I am certain that most are not unhappy with the return to necessity and bondage at the end of summer. The joy of retirement is the absence of necessity, and it is such a trauma that it has become a major concern for our culture. As people stay healthier and live longer, retirement takes on a new, and for many people, omnibus definition. Many fear its approach, don't know what to do with it when it arrives, and flounder about in boredom after a few weeks of it. The philosophic paradox of freedom was never more eloquently expressed than by a tightly disciplined grandfather of mine who, after his retirement as a draftsman for the Pennsylvania Rail Road continued to set his alarm clock for 5:30 a.m., for the sheer joy of getting up, shutting it off, and jumping back in bed. For him, at least freedom needed a foil even to be enjoyed. The point is further illuminated, or perhaps obscured, by the fact that shortly after this grand gesture of liberty it was his custom to arise, put on clean shirt and tie, and by 8:00 a.m. be downtown, having coffee and reading the newspaper, looking and acting for all the world as if he had obligations to fulfill and responsibilities to dispatch. For him, freedom was a delightful fantasy.

It is hardly a recent dilemma. The first and in many ways most critical issue the Christian church faced was this matter of freedom. It is the issue around which the New Testament book of Galatians was written. Actually, Galatians is a letter, written by Paul, Christian evangelist - Jewish Pharisee - to new Christians in new churches in the Gentile cities of Galatia, modern day Turkey.

Before they were Christians those people, like everyone else in history, had looked to their religion as a way to persuade whatever god they believed in to act kindly toward them. That is what religion is, after all, or is inclined to become - the way to convince God to be good and beneficient and generous. Paul, on the other hand, had reversed that dynamic and had begun by announcing that God already loves and is kind and good and has already done everything necessary for salvation. Here came Paul, against the backdrop of every religion in the world, saying that religious rules designed to

For freedom Christ has set us free. Obviously there is a Christian stake in all of this. That ringing phrase, by the way, comes from St. Paul's letter to the Christian churches in Galatia. It comes as the introduction to a paragraph which seems to be about circumcision, of all things, a passage which makes some people blush, others snicker, and everybody uncomfortable. But it really is about freedom. Let's look.

Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. The earliest church was Jewish. the earliest Christians met in Synagogues and it never occurred to them that they were anything other than Jewish. Jesus had said that his purpose was to fulfill, not destroy, the law of Judaism. That law included some 613 rules, based essentially on the Ten Commandments, which gave order to, and regulated, all of life. It defined how human life was to be lived. it is a magnificent thing - the Torah. It is the reason Jews remained Jews; it is why there is an Israel today. It is the way a person lives a righteous and holy life. It is not there intrinsically, but gradually keeping the law came to be seen as the way a person earned God's approval, or love, or salvation. "Be good, obey the law, follow the rule, and God will love you." It's the oldest and most logical heresy in history. Now, there isn't much of an issue here so long as Christianity saw itself as part of Judaism.

Early on in the story, however, a man by the name of Paul, a Jew, a Pharisee in fact, decided to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ up into Asia Minor, to some distinctly unJewish or Gentile people. It is called Turkey today, and the people Paul met in those Galatian cities were singularly uninterested in dietary laws and Sabbath restrictions. And so Paul started where they were, and told them about Jesus of Nazareth, God's son, and the new life available to them because God loved them. And the record shows that Paul was good enough preacher to put it in words and intellectual constructs which were meaningful to them. And when some of them were persuaded that Paul was telling the truth, he baptized them, and introduced them to one another and told them to stick together because they were now a special community called a church: men and women, slaves and free people, rich and poor, Jews and Greeks.

The issue of freedom emerged when the Christians back in Jerusalem, who thought of themselves in Judaic terms, heard what Paul had done. They were aghast, scandalized. Paul was a liberal, a compromiser, willing to delete anything which offended anybody. And they became so concerned and upset that they dispatched teams to travel to all those Gentile cities where Paul had been and correct the error which had been committed. "Friends", they said, "there has been a small mistake. Paul may have told you that all you had to do to be a Christian was believe in Jesus Christ. Well, it's not quite that simple. As a matter of fact, if you want to be a Christian you have to be a Jew first. You will have to abide by this law. And if you are a man you will have to undergo the rite of circumcision."

You can imagine how that went over. Some quit on the spot, and went back to happy paganism. Some did nothing but worried a lot. Others looked up the Mosaic law and began, furiously, to try to abide by it. It was a chaotic situation - heartbreaking to the man who loved all these people and wanted them to prosper and to enjoy their new faith.

Centuries before Christ the Greeks valued freedom as a philosophic category and were probably the first to understand that in matters of the mind and body: in architecture, literature, sculpture, athletics, freedom requires limits and discipline in which to flower. If it is important to run a race, they reasoned, one will not do it very well by spending every afternoon drinking wine and napping in the shade. The freedom to run with speed, strength and grace results from a discipline which seems, at first, the antithesis of freedom.

Absolute freedom as the absence of necessity may be amusing to discuss academically, but it does not exist politically, nor personally for that matter. Some of the best thinkers around have written about that. The late Thomas Merton, Trappist Monk, mystic, scholar, for instance: "I do not find in myself the power to be happy doing what I like....On the contrary if I do nothing except what pleases my fancy I will be miserable most of the time. This would not be so if my will had not been created to use its own freedom in the love of others." (No Man Is an Island, p. 35)

Merton saw that there is something about us that doesn't fit well with freedom as the simple absence of obligation. The thought is echoed elsewhere eloquently. Henrik Ibsen: "Only he is free who boldly aspires forward, whose deepest craving is the deed, whose goal is an heroic act of the spirit."

Many have seen that freedom happens inside a framework, an obligation, a discipline one chooses for one's own. Someone said that "Freedom in its essence....is the acceptance of the harness in which you pull towards an end chosen and valued by yourself..." (Bronislaw Malinowski, Freedom and Destiny, R. May)

Superficially it seems like obligation is oppressive, stultifying, deadening. It would seem that human creativity requires the absence of necessity in which to flourish. But we know better, existentially. We know, don't we that in the pure atmosphere of freedom we create nothing? But give us a deadline, a limit of time, resources, people, and we can create a luncheon, a law brief, a transplant, a sermon: in fact, press us hard and we will be our most creative. Successful artists, writers, musicians - are almost always extraordinarily disciplined people who know that creative freedom means going to work every day at 8:00 and staying at it. I think it was Edison who said that creativity is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.

Rollo May has written a very helpful book on the subject under the title Freedom and Destiny. He observes: "...it is not true that (limits) make one passive and inert. The opposite is true - namely that belief in unlimited freedom, as the flower children demonstrated, tends to paralyze one. For unlimited freedom is like a river with no banks: the water is not controlled in its flow and hence spills out in every direction and is lost in the sands."(p.

Rollo May documents St. Paul. Freedom has something to do with commitment, obligation, discipline. It is a relevant word. It speaks bluntly to the generation which elevates doing one's own thing to a sacred rite. We live in the backwash of the New Narcissism, in which declaring one's autonomy became primarily important and thus the obligation to abide by no expectations other than one's own took on almost theological significance. "I'll

It is there for all of us: both the prison and the liberator God. It may not be cast in the same mold as the debate in Galatians, but for all of us there is the temptation to relinquish the freedom to think, to consider all the options, to examine critically all the alternatives, in favor of someone's tight system which tells us how to think and makes our freedom obsolete.

It is there for all of us: a prison cell - a yoke. We may be in the prison of our own professional expectations, or the expectations of others. It may be the heavy yoke of guilt because we don't measure up. We don't square with a whole litany of expectations about our parenting, homemaking, income level, and sex appeal; and we've been carrying all of it around since childhood. It may be a yoke of guilt because we have been less than we could be, we have been untrue to some high ideal. It may be the prison of fear: fear of failure, fear of sickness, fear of feeling foolish, fear of death. it may be the prison of compulsiveness that dictates every waking moment and which drives us every day of our lives. It may, very simply, be that familiar dynamic of our inability to accept that we are freely loved by our God. That's at the heart of it all somehow.

The glorious Good News of the Gospel; the essence of Christianity, is that we are loved by God, freely. God loves us - in Jesus Christ he has shown us.

And the only way to deal with that is to rejoice in it and affirm it and live it.

Charles Peguy has it right, I think, in a poem which is my favorite:

"When you have once known what it is to be loved freely
Submission no longer has any taste.
All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright attitude of a free man as
he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejection in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation
From a love that is free."

For freedom has set us free. AMEN.

God eternal, we are too willing to be less than you created us to be. Forgive us for that. Give us strength to embrace and to live responsibly the freedom you give, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fidelity means that we have made a promise, a commitment, and that we have accepted the limitations that are part of that promise." (p. 17-18, Grace Notes and Other Fragments)

The noblest thing is the soaring up prayer of a free man on his knees, a poet said. Freedom is not license to do whatever you please, St. Paul understood, but freedom from all the anxieties and fears about salvation: freedom to realize a better and higher self - that self which commits and is loyal and loves and serves others and gives itself to high ideals, noble causes - and other people.

As we come to the final days of another Lenten season and find ourselves drawn closer to the radical center of the Gospel, may I suggest that grace and freedom and obligation constitute the relevant essence of the faith. That cross - that crucifixion - signal God's incredible love for us, extended to us as we are. That strong death means that we are saved by God's grace: saved from sin, death and hell, to use classic terms: saved from alienation, fear, separation, meaninglessness, to use other words. It doesn't matter what words we chose, that cross which stands on steeples, altars, communion tables, and at the center of our faith means that the issue is resolved: we are free; we no longer have to work at our salvation; we no longer have to work at persuading God to love us and save us, nor do we have to bear the guilt for never living up to divine expectations. We are finally and gloriously free. And that cross to which we are now drawn means that our best humanity is affirmed when, in our new freedom, we live by the crucifixion. What that means is that we will find life by losing it: that you will discover your very life when you give it away, obligate it, commit it. The cross of Jesus Christ means that in obedient discipleship and the law of love for others we will know what it means to be loved by God, and therefore saved and thus free. AMEN.